

TEACHERS' DISPOSITIONS: SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY OR FORCING INDOCTRINATION*

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Abstract

Teacher education programs have become increasingly aware of the need to consider appropriate professional dispositions. This article addresses several potentially uncomfortable questions surrounding teacher dispositions including a true meaning of disposition(s), assessing dispositions and the research base of what is known concerning dispositions as related to effective teaching. Additionally, the article speaks to the particularly uncomfortable question of the NCATE role in the dispositions arena.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

1 Introduction

The verbiage of teacher dispositions is not a particularly new idea in the field of teacher training. In a sincere effort to professionalize the field of teaching, the idea of appropriate “dispositions” has become quite familiar verbiage. Professions must be responsible in somehow policing their ranks to see that those who enter the profession do so for the right reason, will be an asset and not a detriment to the profession (or society at large) and will not do harm to the clientele being served. As such, medical schools would likely not want to admit, teach and graduate students who would be predisposed to the practice of human euthanasia or who only wanted to practice medicine for the salary. Likewise, law schools probably do not want to admit, teach and graduate students who would be predisposed to practicing overt social indignities against certain sectors of society while using their legal expertise to remain barely within the law. Just as in these rather extreme examples, persons entering the field of teaching for the wrong reasons can do a lot of damage.

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We know that perceptions drive actions so such concerns across the professions are quite reasonable (Wenzlaff, 1998). Colleges of education have sought to keep standards rigorous and assure that prospective teachers hold the necessary “dispositions” and are entering the profession for the right reason(s). It is generally believed that most teacher training programs do a most respectable job in this regard. However, on balance, it is of great concern to many social science thinkers that the idea of possessing such dispositions may have been noticeably skewed in directions that cannot be considered intellectually honest or even emotionally healthy. This paper is intended to address four potentially uncomfortable questions surrounding the issue of teacher dispositions.

First, what exactly is meant by “dispositions?” Do we have a clear consensus and understanding of such throughout the profession? Can we really measure/ assess such? Can dispositions be “cultivated” or changed in a more positive direction?

Second, we will briefly examine the idea of education as a democratic process as envisioned by Dewey. Does such align with the most current thinking and eventually assessment processes surrounding today’s questions of teacher dispositions?

Third, are the interpretations and mandates of “dispositions” as intended by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) happening in the manner intended by NCATE, or becoming distorted far beyond the scope of acceptable intellect and reason? Did NCATE not do a good job in making this line of thinking clear? A quite uncomfortable question to be addressed here is “Why NCATE”?

Finally, do we really know from a body of intellectual and empirical data that the possession of any body of dispositions is necessarily related to a person’s success as a teacher? The professional literature is replete with writings and references to “desired dispositions” but do we have any particularly compelling evidence that possessing particular dispositions is somehow related to a teacher’s success in general or outside of particular teaching circumstances?

2 What are Dispositions?

It is the nature of American public education to be inclusive, not exclusive. Therefore, we must logically assume it was the intent of NCATE to assist in creating teachers who are able to teach effectively in a global and diverse society and prepared to serve all students, regardless of their birth status or other individual traits. Unfortunately, the weak link in manifesting this school of thought is that while NCATE has required teacher training programs to include necessary dispositions as part of the program and to somehow systematically assess the body of dispositions the individual program has determined to be critical, the directives from NCATE go no further. This becomes the problematic area and the focus of the questions here.

Across the profession(s) there is not a common, consensus type definition of “dispositions.” Instead, there exists a spectrum of definitions which provide for a multiplicity of approaches to some complicated questions (Erickson, Hundman & Wirtz, 2005). The following list is not conclusive but certainly representative of the continuum of thinking (Bunch, 2006):

- Characteristic manners of thinking and acting
- Habitual frames of mind
- Trends in actions that are intentional on the part of the actor
- Values, beliefs and intentions that are discovered in consistent patterns of behavior
- Attitudes, inclinations and personal qualities that candidates hold toward teaching, learning, students and colleagues
- Habits of thinking and action regarding teaching and children
- Prevailing tendency, mood or inclination (p. 6).

Notice that the above list seems to speak more to inherent personal qualities than to observable actions. Other writers and theorists have addressed the inherent internal and personal nature of dispositions while minimizing the behavior component. For example, Zhixin (1990) described a “good educator” as one who is a “good person” whose personality is attractive to children and will inspire them to learn and/or a “learned

person” who knows a subject matter and how to convey it (p. 53). Arnstine (1990) cautions against the use of observable behaviors as evidence that such dispositions are likewise present. He states:

We may point to particular behaviors as evidence of the dispositions we ascribe, but those behaviors are simply evidence, not the disposition itself. We cannot teach the behaviors that exemplify a disposition in the hopes that the disposition will follow, any more than we can teach a child how to use a ruler and then conclude that he is now disposed to measure correctly (p. 16).

According to Damon (2005) the terminology of “disposition” in mainstream psychological literature tends to refer “personality development (p. 3).” He states:

In the scientific sense, therefore, a disposition is a “trait” (or “characteristic”) that is embedded in temperament and “disposes” a person towards certain choices and experiences that can shape the person’s future. It is a deep-seated component of personality, with roots going back to the origins of our temperaments and tentacles that bear major import for who we are and who we shall become (p. 4).

NCATE states their own definition in their literature, but this definition is considered so vague and unidirectional that it can easily lend itself to extremes in thought and interpretation(s) that are far removed from what could be considered “intellectually honest.”

From the NCATE website, we find the following definition of “dispositions:”

Dispositions. The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities and affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator’s own professional growth. Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility and social justice. For example, they might include a belief that all students can learn, a vision of high and challenging standards, or a commitment to a safe and supportive learning environment.

While no definition of dispositions is perfect, or even sufficient, it can be reasonably argued that this definition wants teachers to believe, think and behave a particular way about very broad ideas (Damon, 2005). This definition - and often some rather bizarre interpretations - are at the forefront of most teacher training institutions and programs. It concerns many social science scholars that such extreme interpretations have essentially reached an unquestioned status.

In most of the current literature the distinction between dispositions and behaviors is often not made particularly clear except to say that one is not necessarily dependent on the other. We see frequent references to behaviors as a visible manifestation of dispositions. Likewise, we see such references as “behaviors as dispositions.” But it is clear that most legitimate and scholarly thinking concerning the meaning of dispositions is focused in the direction of inherent beliefs and less on the behaviors that are a manifestation of such beliefs (Richardson and Onwuegbuzie, 2003; Yeh, 2002; Maylone, 2002). Unlike the majority of scholarly thinking, it is clear that NCATE’s definition is intended to include the tendency to act on such beliefs as well as to hold them. Damon (2005) asserts:

NCATE’s operational definition of “dispositions” spills far beyond the precise semantic boundaries established in the behavioral sciences. As I have noted above, NCATE uses the term to indicate moral beliefs and attitudes – a particular set of which it deems appropriate for teachers – as well as a behavioral tendency to be guided by such attitudes. Thus the NCATE’s definition and the standard based upon it, focuses both on candidate’s values and their value-driven conduct. The scientific definition, by contrast, restricts itself to a particular psychological process, albeit one with enormous and long-lasting consequences for personality development (p. 4).

There is much in the literature written primarily by teacher educators that looks at the fuzzy question of “fostering dispositions” or “developing dispositions” or even “strengthening dispositions” in teacher candidates. Much of the literature is descriptive in nature, discussing what would seem a consensus type idea of desirable dispositional attributes to be found in prospective teachers and which will carry into a long and successful teaching career. Others speak of developing or strengthening such dispositions under the notion that teacher candidates arrive at their teaching training program with certain beliefs already in place and that such beliefs would need to be clarified so as to be beneficial (Schulte, Edick, Edwards and Mackiel, 2004). Then there are other writings that point to the notion that particular dispositions need to be developed in candidates, rather or not those dispositions are already present, possibly as the simple result of their own background(s)

and experience(s). This line of thinking aligns nicely with a probably most desirable attribute found in teachers, and part of the Conceptual Framework of my institution, that of teacher as “change agent.” This is a logical assumption since we know that education is intended to bring about certain inherent changes in individuals. No change in a person would logically mean that no improvement came about. But this brings forth another fuzzy question that is sometimes looked at differently in teacher education literature than in mainstream psychological literature. Can one person change the inherent beliefs and behaviors of another?

When teaching in the area of curriculum and classroom management, I often ask students this very question. It amazes me how frequently I get responses that may seem logical from their own experiences but definitely out of line with the most basic tenet of human psychology – that one person cannot change the behavior or beliefs of another. The only person whose behavior or beliefs we can change is our own. We can influence a lot of things in a lot of people, but any change that comes about must come from the person.

Raths (2001) writes of some certain practices that may be used in an effort to “change” the behavior of another, but such efforts are generally looked upon with disfavor and certainly would not find their way into the professional training of anyone, particularly not educators. Such practices would include:

- Belief as Criterion for Admission. ... we could change the profiles of our candidates beliefs by having at least one of the criteria used to admit candidates into teacher education be that of holding the beliefs the faculty has identified as important. Would medical schools accept candidates who did not believe in the germ theory or the scientific method? Would dental schools accept candidates who did not believe in novocaine? (p. 4)
- Confronting the candidate with dissonance. Dissonance theory suggests that if we engage teacher candidates in activities that around dissonance – beliefs might change (Festinger, 1957). One of the sources identified by Festinger is “past experience” colliding with new cognitions. (p. 4)
- Apprenticeship Experiences. In apprenticeships, “novices and experts are from different worlds and a novice gets to be an expert through the mechanism of acculturation into the world of the expert” (Farnham-Diggory, 1994, p. 466). We have used apprenticeships in teacher education since the beginning, perhaps expecting that in the acculturation process our candidates will “catch” the correct beliefs (Farnham-Diggory, 1994). Of course, this hope will be realized only if we place our candidate in settings that activate the targeted beliefs (p. 4).
- Promoting Professional Development. One could argue that primitive and naïve beliefs, “folk pedagogy” in Bruner’s (1996) terms, reflect developmental stages. ... Teacher educators could work with their candidates to promote advancement to higher-level stages. ... case studies describing how people moved from one stage to another, no systemic interventions seemed to operate. Instead, each person had a story about what prompted a change in the way they “knew,” but nothing that seemed to give insight to teacher educators (p.5).
- Values Clarification. ... theory of values that suggested people hold beliefs when they are not fully examined. Only after they are examined and re-accepted after considering alternative, anticipating consequences, and trying out their implication in life itself can a belief become a value. ... In the few experiments carried out at the college level, advocates of values clarification found that the process was slow and not always successful (p. 5).
- Case Study. Examining identical phenomenon through various “lenses,” could bring about changes in belief systems.

Raths (2001) states, “None of these approaches is easy or quick. If they did work, and if they were feasible, and if they were ethical, the interventions would probably take considerable time, with the exception of the first one (p. 5)

Separate from the question of dispositions as observable behaviors is the related notion that dispositions create the forever potential to act a particular way (Bruner, 1996). Again we stress the fact that behaviors are not dispositions but instead assumed to be a quasi-visible manifestation of dispositions. But in keeping with the American way we can dictate and legislate behaviors but we can never dictate thoughts and hence, dispositions. Among teacher educators the idea seems to exist quite strongly that we must somehow get

candidates to believe this was so we can know they will always do things “correctly.” But this mode of thinking almost borders on a false dichotomy. For example, Wilkerson (2006) states:

If a teacher learns what elements comprise a good lesson plan and then demonstrates on multiple occasions that he/she has the appropriate level of skill to produce (and hopefully deliver) effective lesson plans, we are often lulled into believing that our job is done. They have the knowledge and can apply it, but what happens if they do not think it is important? No pre-graduation faculty evaluative judgment of “proficient in planning” will ever compensate for the damage that can be done by the teacher who thinks that lesson planning is a boring waste of time. That teacher will just stand up and deliver some random thought, hurting all of the children in his/her classroom; not just the ones who might be paddled by those who express a belief in corporal punishment. That is the fundamental reason why dispositions are, in the long run, more important than knowledge and skills. The assessment of dispositions helps us to answer the question, “Are they likely to do what we taught them to do when we are no longer watching them?” (p. 2).

It is rather interesting to note that with all the concern, discussion, argument and all concerning dispositions, the inherent qualities in the person, how to somehow systematically identify those qualities, and so on one idea seems to slip past all the rhetoric. There are probably thousands of well established personality profile inventories in publication at the present time that could likely tell us a great deal more about a person’s inherent nature as it relates to teaching than anything we have tried to create so far. These instruments would surely have undergone a rigorous peer review in the scientific community. Why such instruments are not considered is probably anyone’s guess.

Likewise, it is an interesting piece of subtle semantics to note that the NCATE literature does not say that the individual colleges of education must measure dispositions, but that the individual colleges must “systematically assess the development of appropriate professional dispositions of candidates”. This is quite logical because it is well established that dispositions, as defined by most non-NCATE modes, is not a phenomenon which can be observed and measured. Most social science scholars would argue that due to the non-observable nature of dispositions, the ability to truly assess dispositions is questionable (Flowers, 2006). I am not the only scholar of the social sciences who sees some current practices as problematic and probably misinterpreting what NCATE intended.

3 Dispositions, Democracy and Dewey

Educating the youth in a model of democracy does present its own unique set(s) of problems. Education in a democratic fashion requires the learner – at any age or level – to participate meaningfully in their education. This is a relatively easy process for those who have the background and experiences which lend themselves to such appropriate involvement. Likewise, this would be relatively easy for those whose inherent beliefs – a.k.a. dispositions – fall nicely in line with those in charge. But suppose a person’s background, experiences and ultimately personally held dispositions do not easily “mesh” with mainstream thinking. In the case of teacher education in the mainstream, this question might include the possibility of dispositions not meshing with “NCATE thinking.” Does the push for a particular set of dispositions potentially eliminate the democratic involvement of some or many? If democracy is about the individual within the masses, then does the individual lose their “place” when being assessed for dispositions? Maylone (2005) offers the following:

... NCATE has deemed that, for teachers, all that is personal must belong to the profession. Aspiring teacher will be held accountable for whatever ideas the profession decides are appropriate for teachers to believe and act upon (pp 2-3).

The point can be logically argued that the NCATE idea of dispositions is in direct contradiction to the definition of democracy as well as Dewey’s idea of education as a democratic process. Let us consider the following quote from Allen (2006):

If democracy is more than a form of government, and is really “a form of associated living, or conjoint communicated experience” (Schutz, 2001, p. 274), the schools and their leaders should provide this experience to students. Dewey maintained that the democratic way of life required that students be able to assume societal roles, learning both democratic and cooperative work values so that as adults they could change

society. (p. 7).

On the surface this might seem to align with NCATE's idea of dispositions and the bigger picture of democratic values. But as we dig a bit deeper we can see how some social science thinkers may view this notion as a "weak link." The idea quoted above seems to foster a communal/ conformist type of thinking that may not appeal to the sensibilities of some.

4 Current Practices and NCATE

In higher education as well as at the policy level, teacher education as a department, practice and academic discipline is a frequent source of scorn. It is well known that colleges of education must fight for their legitimate academic standing in higher education. The inexact nature of the work done by teachers leads many to believe that research in the social sciences – particularly teaching – is "soft," lacking in academic rigor, or generally not of the same academic caliber as other fields of scholarship (Norris, 2002). Even the recent mandates by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) concerning the "highly qualified teacher" has minimized the importance of pedagogical training in favor of other areas.

NCATE has existed as a legitimate accrediting body for teacher education for more than fifty years. They formed in an effort to lend a degree of scholarly credibility to the field of teacher education and to assure that teacher training programs were held to the same quality of high standards as other licensed professions. It is generally agreed that over the years NCATE has fulfilled their mission and done so quite admirably. But in recent years the organization has begun to fall into a questionable standing. NCATE only accredits about 1/3 of the colleges of education in the country not because only that many have met NCATE's standards but because sometimes states and sometimes individual universities choose not to be affiliated with them. Additionally, as NCATE's standards have become increasingly tedious many small programs are finding it difficult to meet NCATE's demands with existing facilities, resources, funding and faculty. As such, some smaller programs have – out of necessity - begun to look other directions for some sort of accreditation standing.

Accreditation by any institution is primarily voluntary so consequently it is the institution – or the states – that accept and embrace NCATE. The reverse is not true. Therefore, state and federal standards and guidelines will always trump anything NCATE has to say. If we look at institutions and/or states that do not align with NCATE (for example. the University of Texas at Austin or Harvard) we will not likely find poor quality programs that turn out terrible teachers. Instead, what we typically find are strong, respectable programs that "don't mess with NCATE." Concerning the question of dispositions, obviously the non-NCATE institutions must in some fashion develop desirable and appropriate dispositions in their pre-service teachers. It is inconceivable to think otherwise. Perhaps the lack of NCATE nomenclature allows them to truly do so in a manner that is best for their candidates and without the risk of going too far "the other way." NCATE did not invent the standards and ideology to which they ascribe; respectable teacher training programs have done those things for years. Therefore, aligning with NCATE is not magical. It is simply politically convenient (Norris, 2004).

Even beautifully articulated and seemingly humanitarian ideals can run an unhappy gamut and return some undesired outcomes. In the same manner that the rules on Manor Farm (Orwell) began to skew when not questioned along the way, so has been the notion of developing and assessing appropriate dispositions in prospective teachers. It would seem logical that the NCATE verbiage was created to be broad enough to allow for multiple interpretations and to allow individual programs to be designed to support local needs. It is the nature of the social sciences that the convenience of universal applicability comes with the burden of responsible use. This has apparently not been the case with the NCATE verbiage surrounding dispositions.

In the spring of 2006, NCATE was up for a federal review to determine if their federal recognition should be continued. Various conservative "think-tank" type organizations called NCATE to task, demanding their federal recognition be revoked over 2 words in the NCATE literature – social justice. It was argued that the existence of the verbiage allowed for overt discrimination by university faculty and programs against persons holding particular political or social views. This might have been less of a problem for NCATE had their not been various well publicized cases at several universities where students were not allowed to

graduate or complete a program whose dispositions assessment was not looked upon favorably. Arthur Wise, NCATE President, publicly came forth and, while admitting no wrongdoing on the part of the organization, announced that the verbiage would be removed from the official literature of NCATE. It will be interesting to watch NCATE program reviews over the next 3-5 years and see where the dispositions conundrums go.

5 Do Dispositions Matter?

We frequently see writings concerning what dispositional beliefs are the “desired” in every teacher. Likewise, we see a plethora of certainly respectable but not necessarily conclusive literature looking at the question of assessing dispositions, fostering dispositions, validating the assessment of dispositions and whatever. But conspicuously lacking in this literature is the notion that there does not exist any “magical” list of desired teacher dispositions that are necessarily important or known to be of benefit to all children. When we consider that we don’t have a good definition of dispositions (that hasn’t created some social and academic trouble along the way), we don’t have a good clear consensus on what the schools are really supposed to do, we don’t have a clear consensus definition of good teaching, then how can we assume that any list of dispositions to be held dear will ever be sufficient?

There is a second rather uncomfortable question surrounding the notion of needing to see particular dispositions in teachers. Despite all the dialogue, writing, and efforts of teacher educators there really is not any particularly compelling evidence in the body of professional literature that would lend any credence to the question of any sort of relationship between a teacher holding particular dispositions and their success as a teacher. Maylone (2002) calls the notion of desired dispositions into question when he states: ... can the definition of “desirable dispositions” be contextual?

To further illustrate this point, perhaps we might consider the character referred to as “Patch Adams,” the physician portrayed in film by Robin Williams. As a medical professional his beliefs/ dispositions - as evidenced by his methods and behaviors - were most unique, frowned upon by colleagues, but resoundingly successful with terminally ill children. In the context of this character, what constituted “bedside manner,” and to which checklist of “desired dispositions” did he adhere?

Each semester I talk with many undergraduate students and ask why they have chosen to be a teacher. From these students I usually hear a variety of good, not-so-good and sometimes bad responses. There are good reasons for being a teacher which include “a passion for learning” and “wanting to make a difference in the lives of children and youth”. There are some not-so-good reasons for becoming a teacher that include “loving children,” “loving your discipline,” or “always wanting to be a teacher.” These reasons are not bad or inherently wrong reasons for choosing teaching but are hardly sufficient to support a career choice. Some of the bad reasons that I hear are “wanting the summers off” or “it fits the schedule of my children” or worse, “I don’t want to teach, I just want to coach” (as though one is separate from the other). Entering the profession for the right reasons speaks to various levels of dispositional concerns. Certainly a person’s reasons for choosing a career influences how they will practice that career.

Early in this article we referred to the notion that perceptions drive actions. In this regard, the perspective of Wenzlaff (1998) certainly makes sense. Prospective teachers may very well do a lot of damage, or in the alternative, spend much of a teaching career in a miserable state if they do not know and understand their own beliefs about teaching and learning and likewise know and understand how their beliefs align/ differ with others. Usher (2004) states:

Defining teacher effectiveness as a matter of teacher dispositions puts the emphasis on helping people develop and nurture their personal belief systems to become teachers. To learn to use themselves more effectively and efficiently in order to satisfy the learner’s, their own, school’s and society’s purposes. They will have learned to be [emphasis in original] someone who knows and skill in effectively helping other grow and learn. (p. 5).

6 Concluding Thoughts

This report has looked at the question of teacher dispositions and if the notion of fostering and strengthening dispositions fosters democracy or forces indoctrination. Additionally, we have looked at various compelling questions surrounding the notion of desirable dispositions in teachers.

To honestly answer the question of a consensus type definition of dispositions the answer must be “no.” It is clear from the literature that any definition of dispositions goes across a continuum and that most definitions are “tweaked” to meet particular needs in particular places, primarily at the program level. It is of great concern to many that mainstream social science scholars and NCATE are basically “at odds” with a consensus in definition. Likewise, it is not particularly clear in the literature as to whether a consensus exists across the profession(s) concerning the question of dispositions being assessed or measured.

Addressing the question of democracy and the NCATE version of dispositions brings on adversarial relations from both camps. Surely NCATE wants their mode of thinking to align with the accepted ideals of democracy but in actual practice such is not happening everywhere. It is not isolated to a few select thinkers among the social sciences, including the field of teacher education, if the question of adherence to NCATE standards does anything to improve programs, to create better teachers, to professionalize teaching, or is even worth the trouble. In answering the question as to whether or not NCATE ideology of dispositions is being made manifest in colleges of education – and eventually in the public schools – the answer would have to be – it depends on whom you ask. All the recent bad press concerning NCATE’s ideals being taken to an extreme seem to lose sight of the fact that we cannot assume that NCATE meant to do anything but good. The attributes that we know make for good teachers and good teaching were not invented by NCATE. The disappointing note here that is NCATE has perhaps taken their idea a bit further therefore allowing for strange and convoluted interpretations.

It is clear that there exists little or no empirical evidence that any particular set or collection of desired teacher dispositions can somehow be linked to effective teaching across the board. There may be particular dispositions that are “contextually” desirable, but a uniform set that can be “reduced to a checklist” has not been and probably will not be identified.

The efforts in the field to identify the desired list of dispositions identified by desirable behaviors linked to performance data across populations and across time have been futile to this point. The notion of teacher dispositions and the necessity of developing and assessing such is not particularly clear at any level. Therefore, the notion at all levels should be considered carefully so that the desirable idea of dispositions does not become the most undesired idea of indoctrination.

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